DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 845 CS 207 167

AUTHOR Stewig, John Warren
TITLE Forging Links.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English (24th, Oconomowoc, WI, April 1-2, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Cooperation; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Professional Associations; *Professional Development; Teacher Improvement; Teacher Morale; Teacher Motivation; *Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Blacksmiths and their craft have changed with the times, and as times change for teachers, they too should be forgers of links. Teacher-to-teacher links should extend beyond the faculty lounge to support systems and active groups of individuals concerned about each other. Another personal link can be made by developing a grade level, system-wide swap of ideas and materials and by encouraging teachers to write for other teachers. Parental links must be forged at the system-wide and the individual teacher levels. The simple device of communicating in writing about a program can make the program more effective. To forge professional links, those involved in professional groups need to reach out to others in related groups and to teachers now uninvolved with a professional organization. They must also help elementary teachers see themselves as specialists. To forge promotional links, teachers need to be more active in telling their stories to others through articles and media presentations, and in monitoring state legislative activity. As teachers seek to disseminate knowledge affecting classroom practice, they forge a practitioner link. It is clearly incumbent on researchers to design studies that reflect classroom realities, and to report results in ways that make their research more accessible to teachers. Conversely, teachers must be more aggressive consumers of research. (HTH)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
John Warren Stewig
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED220845

# Forging Links

by

John Warren Stewig
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

As a child, riding what seemed an interminable time to visit grandparents in a neighboring state, I listened in covert wonderment to my father recite poetry in the car. Schooled in an era when teachers didn't hesitate to extract quantities of memorized poetry from their charges, my father survived to adulthood with a rich trove of poems he could recall and reenjoy at will. One poem I heard repeatedly on these late summer forays to distant farm relatives was "The Village Blacksmith," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As I grew older, memory of that experience faded, until brought sharply to mind at recent art fairs where the craft of blacksmithing seems to be enjoying new popularity. These new smiths, now both male and female, proudly display artistic products far more elegant than the utilitarian ones my father saw being crafted when he was a child. As the times have changed, so too have the smiths and their craft. Wandering recently past a display of such wares, it struck me that English teachers should also be forgers of links. Times have changed for us, too. I'd like to mention five kinds of links I think we need to forge, to improve our lot, and the lot of other English teachers in these changing times.

What, besides an admiration for blacksmithing, prompted my concern? A newspaper article recently reported information that reflects how English teaching is changing. Of American

CS207167

teachers, 8% leave the profession permanently each year. That does not include those who retire, or leave temporarily for maternity reasons. Another sobering fact is that when a group of teachers were surveyed recently, nearly 70% expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs. It seems clear to me that in constricting times of diminishing resources, both personal and monetary, we cannot afford to lose effective teachers. Similarly, we cannot afford to have fine ones who remain in the classroom become less effective as they become more dissatisfied.

Thinking about this problem led me to conclude that we need to establish five kinds of links, links that will bind us to various constituencies from which we can gather strength in troubled times. The links are personal, parental, professional, promotional, and practitioner.

Think first, if you will, about <u>personal</u> links. We need to find ways of establishing teacher-to-teacher links which go beyond the superficial teacher's room or faculty club relationships so common in schools. Rather, we need to see each other as a support system, an active group of individuals concerned about each other. Such concern needs to extend from seasoned professionals to the few newcomers entering our ranks now. Unofficial mentors do develop when a new teacher joins the system. But how often do we find one officially designated, a fellow-teacher to whom the neophyte can turn? A personal link between experienced teachers can be formed when we swap a classroom for a day with another teacher in our building. How much easier it is to see the problems Mrs. Smith in fourth

grade has in sending me articulate and resourceful students, once I have spent a day teaching her class while she works with mine. Or let's explore the possibility of a plan which puts the building principal in every classroom once a year as teacher. Not just drop-in observation, but all day long in Mr. Tate's low ability seventh grade general English room, while Mr. Tate has released time to renew his enthusiasm doing some observing in another classroom. The same possibilities exist at the university level. Covering another professor's class while our colleague is away presenting at a convention (and incidently renewing energies) allows us to see what the problems are in teaching a different course.

Another personal link can be made when we develop a grade level, system-wide swap of ideas and materials. Imagine the personal links that can be forged if all the fifth grade teachers in the district meet for half a day to exchange ideas about what works for them. The success, incidently, of "The Idea Exchange," an NCTE convention feature for several years, documents teachers' interest in such links with other teachers.

Another teacher-to-teacher link can be forged as we search for ways to encourage teachers to write for other teachers. There are fine teachers whose work never, sadly enough, reaches those in other schools because for the most part teachers don't write for other teachers. I think of two ways this has worked. One, Insights into Open Education, a periodical sponsored by the University of North Dakota,

has for some years actively encouraged teachers to write for others. Recently the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English launched an "Instructional Strategies" newsletter which encourages teachers to communicate with others about their ideas that work. These two more localized efforts complement the nationally-distributed Classroom Practices books from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

A critically important link, far too long ignored, has recently received more English teacher attention. Our link with parents was a weak one we cannot overlook. Links with parents must be forged at the system-wide and individual teacher level. An example of a system-wide link was described in a recent issue of The Reading Teacher. Comprehension improved when parent letters about the reading program were sent home. No other changes were made in the already extant school district program. The simple device of communicating in writing about the program made it more effective. How often do we send home a letter describing some aspect of the language arts program? If parents were better informed about our purposes, perhaps they would less easily succumb to the blandishments of critics.

We need to seek more imaginative ways to involve parents, other than simply encouraging them to passively observe during National Education Week. The innovative program in the Nova, Florida public schools organizes "Conversation Ladies" for kindergarten and first grade students with limited oral language skills. Such involvement is also possible in high

school classes on writing, where adults in the community can serve as resource people talking about the writing demands of their jobs.

Beyond such district sponsored activities, however, individual teachers can establish parental links. An imaginative kindergarten teacher regularly sends a letter home at the beginning of each school year seeking information about ways parents will choose to be involved as classroom visitors, talking about their interests, skills, ethnic backgrounds, and travels. The letter also solicits information about places of employment which children can visit on field excursions. Knowledge of which parents can be available for a conference telephone call at their place of business is also helpful to this teacher determined to forge parental links.

Teachers at any grade level can send a letter of commendation to parents because of a student's good performance during the week. This establishes strong parental links and as a side effect, lets students see the actual use of letter writing. It is a sad commentary on teachers that we seldom model the letter writing behavior we exhort our students to do. I don't refer here to the kind of routine dittoed announcements so commonplace in schools, but rather to personal notes commenting on individual accomplishment. This past semester I taught a language arts methods class of 33 students, and only two could remember taking a positive note home to parents. College staffs probably see such communication as unrelated to

their work. Yet years before the precipitous decline in student enrollment, a perceptive dean realized that freshman students would be impressed with a letter from him complimenting them on their achievement. At the conclusion of my first year at an intimidatingly large public university, this naive freshman was indeed linked to the university more completely because of a letter.

A third significant responsibility is to forge professional links. Those of us involved professionally with NCTE need to reach out to others in related groups. One of my most rewarding concerns this past year has been working with members of the Children's Theatre Association of America, a contact with people new to me, who have new ways of looking at old problems. Now we've issued a joint CTAA-NCTE position statement, on the role of informal classroom drama, which is available from NCTE[1] and CTAA. A professional link that was personally rewarding for me has resulted in a document supportive of our common interest.

As another example, do you know the work of the International Listening Association?[2] A fledgling group founded just four years ago, it enjoys a burgeoning membership, and some of these members undoubtedly have new perspectives to offer us, if we would reach out to them. As a result of our efforts in this area, a liaison between our groups now exists, a link to make our common professional position stronger.

We establish links with other professional organizations to help teachers understand what professional subject matter

groups have to offer which cannot be offered by other groups like unions, which concentrate primarily on working conditions. In contrast, we offer content expertise through conferences, publications, resource people, and committees.

As NCTE members we must also reach out to establish professional links with teachers now uninvolved with our group. Despite our success as an organization, there is a vast number of teachers we do not reach. For example, our high school membership is now around 26,000 members though there are 152,000 high school teachers in the United States. A similar, but less encouraging condition exists among elementary teachers.

We need to help elementary teachers, in addition, to see themselves as specialists. For far too long elementary teachers have viewed themselves as generalists. How can we as English teachers help them develop at least one subject specialization? This does take some energetic reaching out. Most NCTE affiliates are composed primarily of secondary and college members. As one typical example, the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English has had a problem getting elementary members. It seems a confounding circle: There are few members, so few elementary convention sessions are planned, which attract few attendees. The journal seldom features elementary level articles because few teachers of kindergarten through sixth grade belong. Could we, as affiliate members, ask principals to send us the names of particularly effective teachers of language arts? Such teachers could then be actively encouraged to participate as presentors at our state

conventions and to write articles describing their exemplary practices.

At the local level, teachers could work to get their union groups to sponsor a membership in a professional organization for one teacher each year. If you are a secondary teacher, would you make it your job to invite an elementary teacher to come with you to next year's state meeting?

To forge promotional links, we need to be more active in telling our story to others. Articles like the recent Newsweek feature, entitled, "Why Johnny Can't Write,"[3] distress me; not because they are untrue, but because they are partially true. As professionals, we need to become better "storytellers." As English teachers, we have not told our story as well as the media has told its side of our story. To forge this link we need to expand our vision.

Let me share the transition of my thinking on this. When I was a beginning teacher, I thought my work ended at the classroom door. My responsibility was to the children assigned to me, and I did that work conscientiously. Over the years, however, I came to see that teaching is only part of the teacher's job. As a professional, I must reach out to publicize my own in-classroom work, attempting as a consequence to shape public opinion.

Have we explored, for example, the possibility of taking part in one of the locally produced television shows? Most TV stations feature editorials after the evening news, and people from the community are encouraged to present these. In a different medium, radio call-in shows are immensely popular.

Don't overlook them. The crew calling in may sometimes strike you as motley, but such shows attract large audiences. What kind of reaction would we get if we raised an educational issue on one of these shows?

Another broadcasting provision not widely used is the public service announcement. Find out what the FCC regulations on these are, and use them to your advantage in promoting English activites at your school.

Do explore newspaper opportunities in your locale. I'm amazed to still be getting comments, nearly six months afterwards, about a newspaper feature on my work in a public school. The popular press is influential. Fewer people have commented on professional articles I've labored over for months! What are the possibilities of including a once-a-week column entitled, "What's Going On in Our Schools?" Good promotional links could also include a regular column on children's or adolescent books. We bemoan the television viewing habits of youngsters, yet few newspapers regularly review books for young readers. Not every professor of children's literature may choose to write a college text, but we could all do reviews for the local newspaper.

We forge another kind of promotional link in monitoring state legislative activity. Part of the money teachers' unions collect could support the efforts of a representative at the state capitol to influence law-makers' decisions. As more state legislatures get even more deeply into mandating curricular issues, we English teachers need to find effective

ways to promote ourselves with our elected representatives. State affiliate groups could appoint and find a legislative liaison. Fortunately, state groups have the exemplar of the NCTE Washington represntative in this type of work.

A fifth kind of link is the practitioner link, as we seek to disseminate knowledge affecting classroom practice. This is especially critical in this era of media-hyped attention to "Back-to-the-Basics," when all sorts of pressure groups want us to do things we know are not effective.

A continuing problem is that research is in effect useless unless put into practice. Teachers can defend what they know is right, if they have research to back it up. The problem of time lag between research discovery and implementation is a serious one. It has been estimated that about 11 months elapses between the time a new drug is approved and it is widely prescribed by doctors. In contrast, about 2 years elapses between the time a new technique is developed by county agents and it is in widespread use among farmers. In contrast, about 25 years elapses between the time an educational innovation is developed and it is implemented widely.

A significant problem is that we have research but we are not using it. There are two reasons for this. One is that researchers are not reporting in terms that teachers can use. No matter how significant the findings, unless they are understandable, they will not influence classroom practice. A second problem is that when research is available, teachers are not using it. For example, a recent issue of Language Arts featured an article on round-robin reading. Why is this question

still being debated? Years ago the technique was proved ineffective, yet it is still being used. This is clearly an example of knowing better than we teach.

A second example is from research on drama. It is difficult, especially given the tenor of the times, to advocate drama for all students. In a recent survey of 340 teachers, 75% reported that they favored informal classroom drama, yet only 25% reported doing drama regularly with their students.[4] This is despite research evidence showing that drama makes a difference in both reading and language. The Henderson and Shanker[5] study on the relation of reading and drama is very encouraging for the improvement in comprehension which results when children dramatize regularly. My own research on the relation between drama and language gives equal support for drama as an important classroom tool.[6] There are, unfortunately, many other such examples where research knowledge has not helped teachers become better practitioners.

To remedy this, better practitioner links must be forged from both directions. It is clearly incumbent on researchers to design studies which reflect classroom realities. Researchers must also report results in ways that make their research more consumable by teachers.

Conversely, English teachers need to be more aggressive consumers of research. It is not inappropriate, but rather simply infrequent for a teacher to write to an author, asking a question or seeking further clarification. In some ways, publishing professionally can be a bit like dropping a stone

in a bottomless well: it is infrequently that anyone responds. Even though I am not new to publishing in periodicals, it is still personally and professionally gratifying to hear from a reader. This interchange between professionals is another way we can strengthen practitioner links.

The village blacksmith no longer stands beneath the spreading chestnut tree. Instead, smiths of both sexes display their au courant wares at art shows. So too must we English teachers update our approach as we seek to forge links that will keep us energized. We consciously seek to establish personal, parental, professional, promotional, and practitioner links. For these links will give us strength when conditions in education test our mettle.

## References


1. N.C.T.E.; 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

2. I.L.A.; 366 N. Prior Ave., St. Paul, MN 55104.

3. Sheils, Merrill. "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek, December 8, 1975, pp. 58-63.

4. Littig, Eileen. "Drama as an Important Classroom Tool," Project Overview. Northeast Wisconsin In-School Television Project, August, 1975.

5. Henderson, L.C., and Shanker, J.C. "The Use of Interpretive Dramatics Versus Basal Reader Workbooks for Developing Comprehension Skills," Reading World, VOL 17, March, 1978, pp. 239-243.

6. Stewig, John Warren and McKee, John A. "Drama and Language Growth: A Replication Study," Children's Theatre Review, VOL 29 (3), 1980, p 1 & 14.